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ABSTRACT

For the second-, third-, and fourth-year education students (all of them English majors) enrolled in a course about the psycholinguistic basis of the writing process, each 3-hour class involved writing about writing, free writing, discussing readings on writing, trying out writing activities, and reflecting on writing about learning. The course was divided into four topics: models of the writing process; factors in the writing process; teaching implications; and the reading-writing connection. For the first 10 minutes of class, the students and their teacher engaged in Sustained Silent Writing in journals on the "Thought for the Day" (chosen by the teacher as a focus for the lesson), or on a subject of their choice. An hour of pre-writing activity in which students used a 7-point procedure as a starting point for their major papers followed, after which, in learning logs, they reflected on what they had accomplished during class. Assignments were, at first, based on in-class activities and later were related to the writing of the major paper. Although the quality of the major papers was not consistent, the extensive prewriting and drafting experiences assisted many students in producing a piece of writing they were proud to share with their peers, that was generally refreshing to read, and that also allowed their personal voices to come through clearly, as did their convictions about what they were attempting to communicate. (A 20-item reference/bibliography for the course is attached.) (NH)

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WRITING FOR LEARNING ABOUT THE WRITING PROCESS

"Sometimes writing is hard and other times it is easy. Sometimes you succeeded (sic) at what you are trying to accomplish, and sometimes you fail. Everyone has their own views as to what makes writing hard and easy for them, and their own successes and failings." (Sukhraj)

"Writing can be an excrutiatingly difficult and frustrating task at one moment and, at another, a pure pleasure in which completed thoughts seem to flow directly from my consciousness to the paper, through the medium of my pen. Such a Zen experience is rare, however, and I could count on the fingers of my left hand when the latter has been the case (my right is at this moment busily engaged with drafting and revision, hunting and pecking and crumpling)." (Dave)

These quotes are introductions to an assignment in which students were asked to reflect on what makes writing easy or difficult for them. The variation between these two indicates the range of quality which students' papers revealed. This range is only one of the challenges I faced in teaching a course entitled "Psycholinguistic bases of the writing process" to second, third, and fourth year Education students, English majors all. I had misgivings about the course from the moment I agreed to teach it in place of a colleague who was going on study leave. He had taught "Psycholinguistic bases of the reading process" in term one, leaving me to develop my own course for term two. I was hesitant, even reluctant, about tackling this because I felt I knew almost nothing about the area (my own bent is toward the practical courses, the methodology of teaching content reading, for instance). However, I decided to view the experience as a challenge, an opportunity for me to expand my knowledge and my repertoire of teaching skills.

My first step in facing the blank page of an intended course outline was to review what I did know, what I felt confident about. This lead me to a series of readings and activities I had encountered while working with teachers in South Australia during the previous year. The course I had team taught there included a section on the Writing Process which I realized could serve as a source for further reading. Using the References in the readings we had done for this course, I made up a reading list of authors and texts which I would seek out for further, detailed information. From these I would select those I felt were most relevant, useful, current, and original. I read, made notes, rejected and selected, using much the same strategies I employ when preparing a

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research paper. As I progressed, I gained a better sense of what I was attempting and for what purposes.

Eventually I felt I had reviewed the literature sufficiently to begin to develop a course. My aim was to meld content and process in order to give students knowledge through both reading and writing activities. I wanted them to experience the processes we were learning about, not just study them from an academic perspective. Thus I prepared sets of readings, in- class activities, and assignments; I wanted students to be as excited about the course as I had become. To this end, I designed a typical lesson format to provide structure and security while also including a range of student-centered activities which required participation and risk. Each three hour class involved writing about writing, free writing, discussing readings on writing, trying out writing activities, and reflecting in writing about learning. Assignments were based on in-class activities and later in the course were related to the writing of a major paper.

The course was divided into four topics: Models of the writing process, Factors in the writing process, Teaching implications, and The reading-writing connection. An illustration of a class would be one on 'Prewriting: A crucial stage in the writing process.' The students and I began with ten minutes of Sustained Silent Writing in our journals on the T F T D (Thought For The Day) which I used as a set or focus for the lesson. "In adolescence, planning starts to become sufficiently differentiated from production that we begin to see the plan as having properties and containing elements that have only an indirect bearing on the content of the text. This emergence of the plan as an object of contemplation in its own right marks a major advance in the student's development." (Bereiter and Scardamalia, p. 193). Students had the option of responding to the T F T D or of using the time for personal reflection on a subject of their choice. This was followed by a half hour discussion of the readings students had done on this topic, Graves' "See the writing process develop" and Proett and Gill's "Before students write." Copies of the readings were on reserve in the library.

My input on prewriting included perspectives from Graves on process writing and from Bereiter and Scardamalia on planning. These were related to Flower's model of the writing process (Bereiter and Scardamalia).

The prewriting activity, which took an hour, had students follow this procedure as a starting point for their major papers:

1. In a pair with someone writing on a different topic, discuss your topics for ten

minutes.

2. On your own, brainstorm what to include in your paper for ten minutes.
3. In a pair with someone writing on the same topic, discuss for ten minutes what progress you made by brainstorming.
4. On your own, connect ideas from your brainstorm for five minutes.
5. In a different pair, same topic, share where you are for ten minutes.
6. On your own, begin a draft or outline for ten minutes.
7. In the original pair, share where you are now for ten minutes.

In learning logs, students reflected on what they had accomplished during the class. They included the topic of their paper, a statement of purpose for writing it, and the audience to whom it would be directed. They were assigned a reading (Flower and Hayes' "Plans that guide the composing process") and a writing assignment: to reflect on what they had done in the activity, including the brainstorming and outlining, with their reflections to be handed in for marking next class.

Several sources of students' writing were available to me* to guage their progress: journal responses to the T F T D, learning log notations on readings and on reflections of in-class learning, assignments, and major papers. From these, I have selected several which will show the achievements made by the students and will mirror my own learning along with them. It was important to me to participate in the activities with them, demonstrating processes and providing a role model. In addition, I encouraged cooperative learning through discussion of readings in small groups and peer assistance in the writing. The writing workshop approach was used in activities with conferencing with peers the main source of assistance.

The following samples of writing indicate not only what we gained from interacting with the content of the course but also what benefit the use of journals and learning logs were. In response to this T F T D "We do not write in order to be understood; we write in order to understand." (C. D. Lewis in Bereiter and Scardamalia, p. 22) a range of responses was written in journals. Some made my own entry look fairly mundane.

"I agree most with the second of the two quotations. I think this quotation goes to the heart of the writing process, whereas the first merely deals with only one aspect of the result of the writing process. I think writing is as much a learning, growing experience for the writer as reading can be for the reader. Writing is not simply communicating information; it is developing ideas, creating information, sustaining thoughts--it is

giving birth to an obscure feeling or intuition and nurturing it until it can stand on its own, fully developed." (Stuart)

"I would have to take a purely Canadian stance with the statement and say yes and no. While it is true we write things out to understand things, more clearly on a personal level, this is not writings (sic) sole function. If we only wrote so we (the writer) can understand, then why are their (sic) so many books in the library?" (Scott)

"I disagree with this quote because many times the writer wants the reader to understand what he or she is talking about; that is, there may be a central theme or moral behind what he is trying to point across." (Barrie)

Reflecting on what had been learned during the class through a log entry, students again revealed a variety of opinions.

"Today I realized something about myself during journal writing. That is how much writing out my anger helped me to regain positive thinking. I usually use exercise but am unable to for a short time due to an injury. I had built up frustrations that I wasn't channelling through my workout and was holding inside. When I wrote them in my journal it was a great release." (Cynthia)

"One thing I found very interesting today was the importance of a couple of prewriting skills; mind or semantic mapping, and arguing on both sides of a question. I find that I utilize the former very often, as it is a form of brainstorming that puts ideas into logical hierarchies and develops my already existing schema of things. The latter is very useful if one is to become good at the art of rhetoric; persuasion and argumentation, and convincing of a reader." (Dave)

"The process writing activity was very important for me today. It gave me the chance to really concentrate on what narrative prose is all about. I fumbled at first. As I wrote, though, boy was I depressed with what I saw on the page. Dull, morbidly dull. It was going nowhere. If ever I put into practice my wish to write stories I think I'd better spend all my time on outline. Maybe if I really think through my story beforehand there may be hope." (Stuart)

"One thing I learned today about myself: that I feel very strongly about the connection between imagery and language--well, I sort of knew that already but talking about it with Wayne helped me articulate it better. When someone else can share and add to your views it's very motivating-- to me anyway--exciting for me because I'm such an individual learner." (Debra)

During the last class I asked the students in small groups to assess the various

components of the course. On S S W in their journals all the comments were positive, for example, "helpful, enjoyable, got better as we progressed, focussed and helped settle" and "useful, relaxing, good way to start class and topics." On the learning log as an end of class writing task, similar comments were made: "helpful, good reflection tool" and "as focus for conclusion at the end of the class good." Of the assignments, only one student claimed not to understand the purpose while all others were positive: "great, frequent, consistent, knew before we left class what we were doing" and "helpful in exposing the processes of writing and making them understandable, practical, available.". A few illustrations from an assignment will give a flavour for the experiences the students had.

Assignment 4 required students to write and revise a paragraph in a small group. Some groups functioned more effectively than others as the following excerpts indicate.

"The group process or the cooperative learning approach is new to me. There are a few benefits to this method which impressed me:

1. Confirmation from others on my own input speeds the process. I do not have to question my thinking as much as usual or look to outside reference texts.
2. The similarity of another persons thinking and attack skills makes discussion and planning easier.
3. The cluster diagram is efficient in getting it all down concisely." (Gayle)

"Writing a paragraph with a group was difficult and frustrating for us all. We disagreed on everything. We spent a lot of our time debating what subject to write about. Even when we made a decision, the topic was obviously not clear, because Shannon wrote on something related, but not what we had decided on. We seemed to lack communication. I think this was because we each had our own idea of what a 'good topic' would be; this is not conducive to effective group work." (Alice)

"This was an excellent exercise in the practice of revising from general to specific. I found the ideas and input of the other group members invaluable. It was really good to compare mentally the way I would revise a sentence, or make a transition, with the revisions of the others in my group." (Stuart)

As I had expected, the quality of the major papers was by no means consistent. However, I felt that the extensive prewriting and drafting experiences had assisted many students in producing a piece of writing which they were proud to share with their peers (they submitted two copies of the paper, one to go on reserve in the library). Although students had a dozen or more topics to choose from, the majority wrote on

either Prewriting/Planning or Drafting/Revising. A minority wrote on such topics as Expository and Narrative Writing; Academic, Functional and Recreational Writing; and Supporting Students in Their Writing. Predictably marks on the papers were relatively high (27/32 received first class grades, 5 received second class grades). In the final grades for the course, combining first and second term grades, 14/32 received first class grades and 18 second class grades.

From my point of view, I found the major papers in general refreshing to read, partly because students had written for varied audiences (high schoool students, their peers, teachers in the field) and had, therefore, used a more informal, individualistic style than they usually used in writing essays for other courses. Their personal voices came through clearly, as did their convictions about what they were attempting to communicate.

"As you stare out the window you are keenly aware that your mind is blank. You sharpen your already sharp pencil and chew on the eraser as though biting it will force it to write something good, but it's no use. You feel frustrated, angry and confused as you say to yourself, 'I'm stuck'". (Nathan)

""Each time we revise, we change a plan, add ideas, and reject others according to our needs. Understanding that these needs are an entity known entirely to ourselves is the central aspect of revision. . . . By revising what we write, we refine and polish our message and this allows our readers to receive a clear, concrete comment on our perception of life." (Brenda)

"As future teachers, we must be aware that today's highschools are structural dinosaurs in the throes of extinction. Product-oriented, credential-based instruction is being replaced by a holistic, learning oriented instruction. . . . Our job is not to shuffle students from grade to grade, but to ensure that we have used all the teaching resources at our disposal with hope that our students may learn. Their rewards and successes in other classes and beyond highschool will be ours also." (Ward)

The freshness, idealism and commitment to being good teachers I found encouraging and confirming. The teaching/learning experience I had while working with these students has helped me to maintain an optimistic view of the potential for improvements in education, both at the highschool and university levels. Their diligence and enthusiasm more than made up for the planning and marking which consumed so much of my time. In the same way that they will make a difference to the

profession in the future, so they made me feel I had made a difference to them. By writing to learn about the writing process, we learned about much more than we had expected; we learned about ourselves as writers, learners, and teachers.

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*I asked the students to assess their own growth using a questionnaire.

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